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The History of Demining in Nicaragua

Nicaragua's civil war of the 1980s left the country ridden with landmines. Since 1989 a number of organizations have been working in Nicaragua to overcome obstacles and improve the country's landmine situation.

by Elizabeth Beery Adams, MAIC

Background

Nicaragua is a country with a history of armed conflicts. The most recent of these conflicts is the civil war of the 1980s, which left behind a legacy of landmines. Landmines were first used in Nicaragua by the National Guard during the Guerra de Liberación or Sandinista Revolution from 1978–1979. Their use during this conflict, however, was limited and precise. It was not until the civil war two years later that they were used in large quantities.

The civil war in Nicaragua lasted from 1981 to 1989 and was fought between the Sandinista government and the US-backed Counter-revolutionaries (Contras). During the conflict, both sides employed landmines, targeting such sites as key bridges, roadways and power sources. The Nicaraguan military planted 135,643 mines, mostly along the borders in an effort to deter Contra movement into the national territory from neighboring Honduras where they were

operating. The Contras also planted mines, but the number and location of those employed is unknown because no records were kept.

Summary of the Problem

The landmines that remain today are principally along Nicaragua's northern border and primarily affect



Nicaraguans build a human pyramid as part of their celebration of the 17th anniversary of the downfall of the Somoza dynasty. c/o AP

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the rural population, as they prevent the utilization of large areas of land for agriculture and ranching. They also obstruct the use and expansion of key infrastructure such as roadways, bridges, power sources and communications. This severely affects Nicaragua's ability to develop economically. Major Sergio Ugarte of the Nicaraguan Engineer Corps says it is because of this that "demining in Nicaragua is a task of utmost importance, fundamentally humanitarian in nature, which represents an important component in the peace process, socioeconomic stabilization and the consolidation of democracy. It constitutes a task of primary importance for the army as well as for the government and civil society as a whole."

History of Demining in Nicaragua

Because of the increasing consciousness that demining was going to be a crucial part of the pacification and rebuilding processes, the government of Nicaragua, via military resources, initiated the first demining operations in 1989. These demining operations are generally considered military responsibility, although other organizations are well involved.

Demining in Nicaragua has been divided into four stages according to the type and amount of support given to uphold the efforts.

Stage 1: 1989–1992

This stage was initiated in 1989 because of the government's consciousness of the problems posed to the reestablishment of infrastructure, production and economic activities. General demining objectives were developed that would shape all future mine-related activities in Nicaragua, such as:

- Clearing mined areas
- Reducing the risk of mine-related accidents

- Rehabilitating mined areas to make them productive
- Repairing and maintaining energy services and infrastructure previously affected by mines.

This phase was also characterized by the development of specific, immediate objectives that were carried out by the Army using basic equipment that offered little protection.

In 1990 the Nicaraguan government solicited help from the Organization of American States (OAS) to evaluate the mine situation in Nicaragua with the aim of developing a National Demining Plan. The OAS responded by designating a team of experts from the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB) to oversee the

In April of 1992, Nicaragua presented its resulting National Demining Plan to the OAS.

Stage 2: 1993

One year later, demining operations by Special Demining Units (UED) began under the supervision of the Mission of Assistance for the Removal of Mines in Central America (MARMINCA).

The UED used in these operations were units made up of 27 men outfitted with special equipment. They developed valuable experience in this type of operation and were crucial to the establishment of strong relationships and coordination with the OAS and IADB.

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task. The current National Demining Plan is based on their findings:

- 150,000 mines were deployed in the national territory, not including UXO.
- About 80% of the mines deployed were registered with the military; the rest were used by the Contras.

- A 10-year timeline would be necessary to execute demining.

- The army has the capacity to form engineering units to carry out demining operations.

- The OAS can provide the necessary support for demining operations by way of the IADB.

This stage was suspended in November of 1993 because of lack of funding; however during the operations 2,373 mines were destroyed, 60 targets were demined, and 27,643 square meters were declared mine free.

Stage 3: 1994–1995

Though Stage 2 operations had been halted, the Army recognized the importance of continuing to demine. They continued to develop operations with the support of the government and funds from state institutions such as the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure and the National Enter-

Latin America

prise of Electric Energy. They were able to maintain and develop cohesion and continue operations with a limited force of 60 men, destroying 18,053 mines, demining 192 targets and clearing a total of 143,878 square meters.

sonnel. There were also several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved in demining in Nicaragua during Stage 4: the Programa de Barreminas Ligeras with Japan, the International Committee of the Red

guan Government is currently working out a deal with Japan to get more mechanical clearance machinery and hopes to put that into effect as soon as possible.

■ Mine dogs are an integral part of demining operations. c/o AP



Stage 4: 1996–1999

In July 1995, the Nicaraguan government presented a renewed request for support before the International Community at the United Nations Conference in Geneva. They received positive responses from various governments by way of bilateral agreements and support through the OAS. Countries giving aid via bilateral agreement were Denmark, Germany, the United Kingdom and Russia. Norway, Sweden, Holland, Germany, Australia, Argentina, Russia, the United States, France, Spain, the United Kingdom, Japan and Canada all offered support by way of the OAS and IADB. Donor countries offered detection/protection equipment and training, most of which was administered and supervised by the MARMINCA per-

Cross, the Nicaraguan Center for Strategic Studies and the Italian NGO MOVIMONDO.

During this time, the UEDs grew to 400 men that demined 192 targets, destroyed 33,783 mines and cleared 1,142,422 square meters. MARMINCA also began certifying Nicaraguan military personnel to oversee demining operations.

Methods Used in Demining

Nicaragua has used a variety of methods in its demining efforts, beginning with basic equipment such as probes and metal detectors and moving towards mine-detecting dogs and large mechanical mine clearance equipment, to ensure the most effective demining possible. The Nicara-

Challenges

Nicaragua has faced many of the typical challenges of demining operations since the program's inception in 1989. There is the difficulty of locating mines because of inaccurate maps, displacement due to natural processes and disasters, challenging topography, demining accidents, the state of national infrastructure and the lack of necessary funding. But perhaps the biggest challenge of all has been the wake of Hurricane Mitch, which swept across Central America in 1998.

Mitch's torrential rains and the flooding it caused displaced many of the landmines still in the ground and scattered debris across mine fields rendering previous land surveys virtually useless and making the mines even

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more difficult to find and remove. Flooding and high winds also damaged some of the equipment used in the demining operations, causing further delays. The population at risk from landmines has increased significantly because the mines have been scattered to previously mine-free areas.

Other Aspects of the National Demining Program

Mine awareness and victim assistance are integral parts of the National Demining Plan. There has been an ongoing educational campaign focusing on the prevention of mine-related accidents. Fundamental elements of this campaign include the labeling of mine fields, a mass media campaign using television and radio, educative materials and mine awareness training. The National Demining Commission has formed a subcommission, the Subcommission on Education on the Prevention of Mine Related Accidents, to deal with this aspect of demining directly.

Several NGOs are also involved in mine awareness and victim assistance programs in Nicaragua. The Nicaraguan Center of Strategic Studies and the Nicaraguan Red Cross both publish JMU Scholar Commons, local people to promote mine awareness

and victim assistance. PADCA helps to fund the mine awareness programs presented by the Army, and UNICEF is becoming more involved in both mine awareness and victim assistance efforts in Nicaragua.

Results Thus Far

Although there is still much to be done, Nicaragua has had relative success in its demining efforts thus far. UEDs have destroyed 64,874 mines and demined 640 of 991 targets, clearing 32 of the 62 municipalities and almost half of the borderland. They have been able to rehabilitate 2,120,136 square meters of land, benefiting 668,069 people.

Goals for 2001

In the coming year, Nicaragua's demining goals are to:

- Destroy 11,684 planted mines.
- Destroy 45,000 stockpiled anti-personnel mines (aiming to finish destruction of stockpiles in December 2002).
- Employ demining machinery donated by Japan.
- Declare Chinandega, Boaco, Chontales and Region Autonoma del Atlantico Sur mine free.

- Coordinate an integral mine awareness plan.
- Gain the support of organizations and states through the National Demining Commission to help with victim assistance.

Conclusion

The civil war of the 1980s scattered landmines throughout Nicaragua, drastically affecting the growth of the country's economy. Thus, in 1989 the government began the first of its four stages of demining. From its use of basic demining equipment to advancements towards mine-detecting dogs and large mechanical devices, Nicaragua has been relatively successful in its demining efforts, despite setbacks such as Hurricane Mitch. The populace now looks ahead towards completion of their future goals, in hopes of ridding Nicaragua of landmines completely. ■

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